

# Historic Ithaca Celebrates 50 Years

Donna Eschenbrenner, Correspondent 6 p.m. EST February 19, 2016

## Loss After Demolition Inspires Pride and Preservation



(Photo: Provided Photo)

In 1844 Ithaca's early citizens built a stone and brick Greek Revival-style city hall on the corner of Seneca and Tioga Streets. Built to last, the building stood for 122 years until it was demolished in 1966.

That loss stirred community members to organize in order to save other historic buildings from the era's urban renewal plans. Following the advice of an officer of the National Trust Historic Preservation, a small group of Ithacans formed an affiliate group under the name Historic Ithaca, Inc.

Pride in Ithaca's history and architecture inspired early proponents to preserve additional buildings and structures, share their appreciation of Ithaca's built environment with others, and recognize outstanding preservation projects – all efforts that continue today as Historic Ithaca celebrates 50 years.

Early on, Historic Ithaca operated house tours on East Hill and in DeWitt Park. It presented its first preservation award to developer Joseph Ciaschi in 1968. He converted the abandoned Lehigh Valley Railroad Station into the Station Restaurant, now the Chemung Canal Trust Company, completing perhaps the first adaptive use project in Tompkins County. Historic Ithaca has made over 300 awards since 1968.

Historic Ithaca also focused on protecting DeWitt Park and four threatened, nearby buildings: the Clinton House, the Boardman House, the Old Courthouse, and the DeWitt School. All four represent significant local preservation victories. More recently Historic Ithaca has partnered with the Ithaca Landmarks Preservation Commission in the designation of the University Hill, Henry St. John, and Downtown West Historic Districts.

In the 1980s, Historic Ithaca expanded its geographical focus to include rural communities outside of Ithaca. Since the 1990s, it has helped to save structures and buildings throughout Tompkins County.

Historic Ithaca purchased the State Theatre, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, one year after the long-neglected theatre had been condemned by the city in 1998. With a mix of grants and community generosity, Historic Ithaca completed the first phase of restoration and the theatre reopened to a packed audience in 2001. After eight more years of restoration, the theatre was sold to a new non-profit organization dedicated to its operation. Today the theatre is a key contributor to downtown Ithaca's cultural and economic vitality.

For twenty-five years, Historic Ithaca has championed building material reuse through Significant Elements, an architectural salvage store housed in a century-old warehouse at 212 Center Street. In 2010 Historic Ithaca launched its Work Preserve program to offer young adults job-readiness training through hands-on work.

Especially as Ithaca and Tompkins County grow in population and new development increases, Historic Ithaca remains committed to promoting the value and enhancement of our historic buildings and neighborhoods through education, advocacy and action. Historic places boost our quality of life, contribute significantly to economic vitality in Tompkins County and the Finger Lakes region, and deserve to be enjoyed and treasured by all. Historic preservation is also an inherently "green" practice that can be a cornerstone of community sustainability.

Stop by The History Center during March to see exhibition panels on our history and join us at one or more of our events this year.

*Historic Ithaca Staff members collaborated to write this article.*